PRIMATES' MEETING: TORONTO, MARCH 1986

STATEMENT ON
WOMEN IN THE EPISCOPATE

1. The Primates of the Anglican Communion discussed the question of the ordination of women to the episcopate against the background of Resolutions 21 and 22 of the 1978 Lambeth Conference. They did so at the specific request of the Episcopal Church of the USA in the light of two resolutions from the House of Bishops passed at the meeting of its General Convention at Anaheim in September 1985. All four resolutions are appended to this statement and are essential for a correct understanding of the long discussion about the ordination of women in the Anglican Communion.

The Primates noted that Resolution 21 of the Lambeth Conference opened by stating that some Anglican Provinces had already affirmed that there were "no fundamental or no theological objections to the ordination of women to the historic three fold ministry of the Church". This in principle envisaged the possibility of ordination to the episcopate, as the Conference also encouraged the Churches to "continue in communion with each other, notwithstanding the admission of women .... to the ordained ministry".

On the other hand the Primates also took note of Resolution 22 which, while noting the proper autonomy of each Province, went on to recommend that "no decision to consecrate be taken without consultation with the episcopate through the primates and overwhelming support in any member church and in the diocese concerned, lest the bishop's office should become a cause of disunity instead of a focus of unity".

The Primates did not consider these resolutions to be inconsistent with each other but to reflect different emphases. One was concerned with the theology of the three-fold ordained ministry, the other with the structures which go to maintain the Church's unity.

A similar difference of emphasis was noted between the two resolutions from the General Convention. On the one hand the resolution declaring the mind of the House on women bishops was a clear indication of the present corporate view of the bishops in the USA. They "do not intend to withhold consent to the election of a Bishop ... on ground of gender". Nor was there a question of any canonical impediments as the ordination of women to the episcopate was made possible at the 1976 General Convention. On the other hand the request for the Presiding Bishop to appoint a committee to study the "eucmenical and ecclesiological considerations" indicated an awareness of wider dimensions than the theology of the ordained ministry. The study, if approved by the House of Bishops in the USA, would be offered to the Lambeth Conference of 1988. The Convention resolution was consciously adopted as a response to the Lambeth request for consultation on this matter.

In the resolution declaring the mind of the bishops, the Primates recognized an articulation of where the American Church now stands. The movement towards women in the episcopate was not thought in the Episcopal Church to be precipitate but was seen as appropriate and just: a fulfilment and expression of the whole ministry and mission of the Church. The Primates were fully aware that the Episcopal Church had the constitutional right to proceed to the ordination of women to the episcopate.

At the same time the Primates welcomed the second resolution requesting consultation and wished to see the earlier resolution in that wider context. They took this as an indication that the Episcopal Church recognized that such action could have consequences in the life of the wider Anglican family - and ecumenically.

2. This raised the nature of the consultation requested - a matter also understood to be under discussion within the Episcopal Church. The Primates did not see consultation as requesting permission. Nor, on the other hand, did they understand it as merely informing the Communion of what was likely to happen. They saw consultation as a two way process in which, while the Episcopal Church could explain the reasons behind its position, the other Churches of the Communion could present their reflections on this issue and in turn themselves be challenged. Consultation was seen to include a spelling out of the consequences of the ordination of women to the episcopate within the wider Anglican family, in order that the Episcopal Church's decision should be as fully informed as possible.

3. The Primates went on to discuss some of the ecclesial and ecumenical aspects of the ordination of women to the episcopate and asked that continuing consultation in the Episcopal Church and elsewhere in the Anglican Communion should take them into account.

Questions,opinions and observations expressed by Primates included the following:

(i) Whether collegiality did not prompt some restraint until discussion by the whole episcopate at the 1988 Lambeth Conference - though this view was not taken to imply that a Lambeth Conference could decide such a matter for the autonomous Provinces;

(ii) Because a bishop is consecrated for the whole Church the opening of the episcopate to women appeared a more serious step than ordination to the priesthood. It would be important to recognize the consequences if bishops in the Anglican Communion were not in communion with one another;

(iii) Because the bishop is instrumental not only in maintaining communion within but also between dioceses, the admission of women to the episcopate was seen by some to raise new questions of authority. Decisions affecting the whole episcopate ought not to be made by one part of the Anglican Communion alone;

(iv) That a consecrating Church should consider its responsibility if the episcopal office became a focus of disunity - although it was recognized that this might be a failure of the Church in understanding the promptings of the Spirit;

(v) That a consecrating Church carries a serious responsibility to the person being consecrated - lest in this new situation a woman found herself open to rejection by parts of her own diocese, province or the Anglican Communion;

(vi) Ecumenical perspectives may be short or longer term - could the ordination of women to the episcopate be seen as a long term contribution to ecumenical progress rather than as a short term obstacle?

(vii) The argument as to whether women in the episcopate will contribute to ecumenical co-operation and understanding might be applied in different ways in different Provinces - this will depend upon the particular relationships and ecumenical partners in each country or region;

(viii) Though unity should never be at the expense of truth there could be a real tension between discerning the truth through the search for a consensus of the whole Church and what the Holy Spirit also appeared to be saying in particular times, places and cultures.

4. The Primates, recognising that the authority of the Holy Spirit transcends Canon Law, went on to identify a double dimension. First, the need for a correct constitutional position with regard to Provincial Canons and in relation to the Lambeth Conference - this was not in doubt. Secondly, the need to go on beyond this to seek a common mind in a particular Church and among the bishops of the whole Communion. This required not only a maximum of prior discussion but also the recognition that reaching a common mind does not necessarily mean unanimity.

After a sympathetic as well as critical discussion the Primates asked the Archbishop of Canterbury to continue the process of consultaiton by establishing a small Working Party. It would gather together the reactions of the Anglican Provinces (or Regional Councils where this was more appropriate) to the admission of women to the episcopate.

The Primates' Working Party was asked to collate the responses of the Provinces by June 1987 in order that the Episcopal Church of the USA could take the findings into account in September 1987 when the House of Bishops will also be due to receive the Report of its own consultation. The Report of the Primates' Working Party will be an important resource for the Lambeth Conference of 1988, alongside the Report from ECUSA and the study on women and the episcopate initiated in the Church of England. The Primates invited the Secretary General of the ACC to facilitate the Working Party and to expedite communication between the Provinces.

Mississauga, 14 March

STATEMENT FROM THE PRESIDING BISHOP OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH, USA

THE MOST REV. EDMOND LEE BROWNING, ON THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN TO THE EPISCOPATE

I welcome the Statement on women in the Episcopate issued by the Primates of the Anglican Communion. It reflects the quality of the consultative process within the Anglican Communion, it is a testimony to the mission and aspirations of one branch of the worldwide community of faith and it witnesses to the deep commitment to unity of the Body of Christ.

The Statement is in response to the request of the Bishops of the Episcopal Church in the United States for consultation on this matter in accordance with Resolution 22 passed at the 1978 Lambeth Conference. I am satisfied that the Primates have responded fully to our request. The deliberations have been candid and the Statement reflects the profound nature of the consultation.

The process of consultation initiated at this meeting will continue beyond this gathering within the Episcopal Church, USA and throughout the Communion. I think that the Statement will enrich our discussions and, I believe, they will continue with the affirmation that the movement and aspiration for women in the Episcopacy are just and appropriate.